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Malthus

OF ENGLISHMEN LIVING a hundred and fifty years ago, in 1816, the most famous was no doubt Wellington and the most infamous, in the eyes of many people, the Reverend Robert Malthus.

There are several reasons why Malthus's place in history is secure. One of them is his involvement in the dialectical sequence opening with Richard Price's defence of the French Jacobins. It is well known that Edmund Burke came out with eloquent arguments on the other side; that Tom Paine answered Burke with *The Rights of Man*; that Paine's friend William Godwin wished to correct him—convinced that education rather than reformed political institutions was the panacea for a human race born not in sin but *good*; and that Malthus then pointed out that to *be good* was impossible if there was not enough to eat. On his principle the likelihood of most people having enough to eat was not very strong. "Taking the whole earth . . . and supposing the present population equal to a thousand millions, the human species would increase as the numbers 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, and subsistence as 1.2.3.4.5.6.7.8.9. In two centuries the population would be to the means of subsistence as 256 to 9; in three centuries as 4,096 to 13, and in two thousand years the difference would be almost incalculable". Malthus's *Essay on Population* ran to six editions, and before he had finished modifying his text he knew he had been somewhat too absolute to begin with.

A second reason why Malthus's place in history is secure is to be found in these words written by Darwin, when, at the age of twenty-nine he re-read the *Essay*. "Being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence . . . it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved and unfavourable ones destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species.

Here, then, I had at last got a theory by which to work". However, as Sir Gavin de Beer has remarked, "there is irony in the fact that Malthus's aim was to prove that man was socially unimprovable, while Darwin used one point in his argument to show that all species can improve their adaptations."

And a third reason is quite simply that Malthus once and for all started the more or less civilized world debating the population question. Like nearly all great pioneers he had more obscure precursors; he himself acknowledged his debt to Robert Wallace and J. P. Susskind, mentioned that he had consulted the works of Hume, Richard Price and Adam Smith, and of course he alluded to significant passages in Plato, Aristotle, Montesquieu, Franklin and Arthur Young. Leslie Stephen when editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* made it his own business to deal with Malthus. His summing up is neat: ". . . Malthus had stated the doctrine in too abstract form, but the only question now concerns not its undeniable importance, but the precise position which it should occupy in any scientific theory of social development."

Malthus's economic—and Christian—pessimism did not inhibit him from hopefully making his notorious recommendations that people should marry late rather than early, refrain from artificial contraceptives and (so to speak) behave themselves—that is, to use the prosaic language of the Kinsey team, have no pre-marital or extra-marital coitus. All kinds of people have fumed against him for the inevitable bias of his social prescriptions against the poor, nobody that I know of has raged or wept over this kindly gentleman's neglect of the emotion of love—unless we except Shelley's remarks (Shelley was Godwin's son-in-law) in the preface to *Queen Mab*. However, as Professor Glass has said, it is possible to accept, in a general way, Malthus's theory while jettisoning

his rules of conduct: family limitation, moreover, has not, as he predicted, "reduced individuals to indolence or society to stagnation".

Glass has adduced the instance of Ireland as a country that has followed rules of conduct indistinguishable from Malthus's. The trouble is, as he admits, that it is very hard to estimate the amount of concubinage and illegitimacy there; in Spain—where no more than in Ireland was Malthus responsible for the nation's pattern of sexual behaviour—a flow of tourists has apparently eased the pressure on the brothels. After all, some of Malthus's compatriots were quick to object that late marriage would mean more prostitution. Francis Place was one of the earliest of them; "our only care", he said, "should be that we do not in removing one evil introduce another of greater magnitude". And it was Place, certainly not Malthus, who was the first apostle of the birth-control movement in England. Yet it had needed Malthus to produce "neo-Malthusianism". This is not exactly another irony, but all the same something like one (from the Malthus point of view).

To economists, the population question is necessarily bound up with demand and supply, and with the "devil", as Keynes called it, of underemployment. There has been much criticism of Malthus's proposition that—in the words of A. T. Peacock—"with the application of successive units of labour to a fixed quantity of land and capital, a stage is reached when the output per head of the population begins to diminish". This is too rigid again; but empirical

evidence also varies a good deal with time and place—thus one cannot lay it down that the birth rate falls with improved conditions: we have seen it rise without the conditions deteriorating, though this could not possibly be the case to-day in, say, Southeast Asia. And must it always be true that "the terms of trade have a long-run tendency to turn against primary-producing areas"? *When* it is true, Malthus's principle must also seem true to the local inhabitants.

Malthus, born 1766 died 1834, was the son of a landscape gardening enthusiast in easy circumstances who was a friend of Rousseau. He was a graduate of Jesus College, Cambridge; he married in 1804 and had a son and a daughter; from 1805 on he was Professor of History and Political Economy at Haileybury College. In politics he was a moderate whig, not too pleased by the Reform Act of 1832, but he approved the Factory Acts and Catholic Emancipation. He had a hare-lip. All the evidence goes to show that he had a gentle nature; his friend William Otter, Bishop of Chichester, said that in fifty years he had never seen him "ruffled or angry". By his concentration on the subject his name is connected with he did more than enough good for the unintentionally cruel absurdity of his rules of conduct to be forgiven him; he also wrote, among other works, an important book on the nature of rent. He had only those two children: perhaps if like Francis Place he had had thirteen he might have been more tempted to go the whole way.